

# Lessons Learned

## A Report of the DASSC Writing Inquiry Project

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### Cause for Concern

In 2009 the Colorado Commission on Higher Education released its annual Legislative Report on Remedial Education. The report contained startling statistics about incoming college students: 36.7% of students in 2-year institutions and 8.8% of students in 4-year institutions required remediation in writing.

In Douglas County and Aurora Public Schools this meant that over 300 of their graduating seniors were not prepared to be successful college writers. This concern is alarming on many fronts, not the least of which is economic. At the Community College of Aurora alone remediation costs the college \$885, 224 annually.

Alarmed by these statistics, the superintendents of Aurora and Douglas County Public Schools, John Barry and Jim Christensen, knew that this issue must be addressed. When Jim Christensen left Douglas County, the new superintendent, Dr. Elizabeth Celania-Fagen, shared the urgency for tackling this issue.

In coordination with the Denver Area School Superintendent Council (DASSC), the two superintendents directed their curriculum directors and secondary literacy coordinators to collaborate on a project to study the apparent disconnect between expectations and practices in writing at the secondary and post-secondary levels of education, and so the DASSC Writing Inquiry Group began. This document provides the story of the group's findings.



## The Inquiry Process

Over the course of the 2010/2011 school year the group collaborated on an inquiry project designed to better understand what needs to happen in order to ensure that high school graduates will be successful writers in college. As a means to reach that goal they focused on the following questions:

- What do high school writing teachers and college professors who teach writing need to know about expectations, curriculum, and instruction at both the secondary and post-secondary levels?
- What writing dispositions, skills, and knowledge are needed for incoming college students to be successful?
- What does it mean to prepare students as writers for college?

Each of the six meetings included exploration of topics ranging from studying syllabi of post-secondary writing courses to carefully analyzing student work in order to find and annotate exemplars of student writing.

Typically, meetings included a panel of invited guests or a speaker, discussions of professional readings that focused on the topic issue at hand, and small group exploration of relevant issues. Below is a summary of the topics explored over the year:

- The context of University of Colorado Boulder's writing program including accreditation requirements, presenter: John Ackerman, director of Program for Writing and Rhetoric;
- Syllabi and course descriptions of writing courses at the secondary level (mostly senior-level courses) and at the post-secondary level;
- Post-secondary writing instructors' expectations for writing and typical instructional practices, panelists from UC Boulder and Aurora Community College;
- Writing in content courses at the community college level, panelists from Aurora Community College;
- An examination of the Aurora Community College Tool Kit that includes writing guidelines for various disciplines;

- Exploration of first year college students' perceptions of their preparation for writing in college, panelists included former high school students from Douglas County Public Schools;
- Analysis of a study co-conducted by Joanne Addison, University of Colorado Denver writing professor, that reviewed writing practices at the high school and college level;
- Examination of student writing at the secondary and post-secondary level from participating districts and universities;
- A video interview with Daniel Nanio, literacy specialist from Pickens Technical College, that focused on writing in the workplace;
- Examination of the Accuplacer, a computer-based assessment test used by community colleges to determine if students need to take a basic (or remedial) writing course; and
- Discussions of research articles.

As a result of study, the group gleaned multiple insights. However, by no means were all of the questions thoroughly answered. In fact, during the course of the year-long study, the group uncovered even more questions.

The remainder of this document outlines the group's major findings and recommendations to high school English departments and school districts.



## Questions and Answers

### How are students placed in remedial writing courses and supported by post-secondary institutions?

- In accordance with policy set by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, The University of Colorado at Denver and at Boulder do not offer remedial writing courses. The assumption is that any student who meets the requirements for entry into the university is a competent enough writer to be successful in college. However, it is important to note that both the University of Colorado campuses offer tremendous support for all writers, including those who are struggling and those who need additional guidance. Many instructors meet with students during office hours, and each campus provides support through their writing centers.
- The community colleges, which offer remedial courses, require students to complete the Accuplacer, a standardized test developed by College Board.
- After examining and taking the test themselves, the inquiry group concluded that students need the following skills and knowledge to be successful on the test:
  - The function of grammar and syntax, such as parallelism; punctuation rules, including how to punctuate subordinate clauses that introduce a sentence; and sentence skills, including how to analyze sentence structure, revise the sentence according to author's purpose, and combine sentences effectively;
  - Skillful manipulation of language without context; and
  - A strong vocabulary.

According to the Accuplacer website, the writing sample is scored on the following criteria:

- Focus—The clarity with which you maintain your main idea or point of view
- Organization—The clarity with which you structure your response and present a logical sequence of ideas
- Development and Support—The extent to which you elaborate on your ideas and the extent to which you present supporting details
- Sentence Structure—The effectiveness of your sentence structure
- Mechanical Conventions—The extent to which your writing is free of errors in usage and mechanics

A link to the Accuplacer website can be found at <http://writinginquiry.wikispaces.com/>.



### What are college and other post-secondary instructors looking for in terms of writing proficiency? What writing skills lead to success in college?

Despite Colorado Commission of Higher Education (CCHE) guidelines and syllabus approval requirements, there appears to be some variation in community college and university instructors' foci in introductory composition courses. However, panelists at the community college and university appeared to agree on the importance of the following skills:

- Writing that reflects the various disciplines, which includes writing in the workplace;
- Practical writing within and across digital environments;
- Evidential reasoning based on diverse and multiple sources;
- Argumentation: the ability to develop claims, provide support, and develop credible warrants;
- Writing that addresses specialized audiences and actual problems, including writing that targets clients in the world outside of academia;
- Appropriate voice (e.g., active rather than passive except for some scientific writing; appropriate level of formality for the purpose and audience);
- Writing that results from close readings of texts, talk, graphics, and web data;
- Ability to condense dense work (i.e. books, corpuses, data sets);
- Ability to write extended text;
- Ability to write effectively in multiple genres, including literary journalism and the literature review; and

- Rhetorical knowledge, which includes:
  - Focus on a purpose;
  - Response to the needs of different audiences;
  - Appropriate response to different rhetorical situations;
  - Use of conventions of format and structure that are appropriate to the rhetorical situation;
  - Appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality; and
  - Understanding of how genres shape reading and writing.

### **What knowledge of grammar should students bring to college?**

- Subject/verb agreement;
- Power of active voice;
- Rules of punctuation;
- Understanding and avoidance of dangling modifiers;
- Understanding and avoidance of run-on sentences ; and
- “Get ‘to be’ out of papers.”

### **What dispositions do college professors value?**

- A learning stance wherein students continue growing as writers throughout college (and life). Sommers and Salz argued that “[s]tudents who see themselves as novices are most capable of developing new skills; students who ... write about something that matters to them, are best able to sustain an interest in academic writing throughout their undergraduate careers.”
- Recognition of and embracing the importance of endurance and stamina especially as students write in-depth pieces;
- A sense of curiosity and eagerness to inquire as means to generate, develop, and explore ideas. One college writing instructor explained that she wanted students to come slowly to a thesis as they become curious about an idea and want to explore it.
- A hunger to read voraciously and widely;
- A dynamic vs. fixed mindset;
- A willingness to transform boring topics by adjusting focus and approach to the topic;
- Understanding and valuing the craft of writing rather than perseverating on correct or incorrect language/grammar;
- Understanding that a first draft of writing is just a beginning and not a finished product;
- A willingness to seek and take feedback and use it for growth;
- Sensitivity to patterns (rather than viewing information as isolated facts);
- Willingness to analyze and synthesize;
- Persistence in moving beyond the self in analysis; and
- Understanding that writing (and reading) are powerful tools for inquiry.

### **What skills and dispositions do higher education instructors commonly see in introductory composition students?**

- Eagerness and buy-in;
- Ability to function well as a community of learners;
- Inquiry stance;
- Ability to talk about writing;
- Ability to annotate, receive feedback and conference with peers;
- Ability to think critically; and
- Knowledge of varied sentence structures.

### **What are students primarily writing in college?**

- In-class essays, critical analyses, research-based writing, personal essays, lab reports, and literary interpretations;
- Writing based on reading some kind of text;
- Fact-based opinion papers;
- Technical writing;
- Annotated bibliographies;
- Writing that addresses a specific and authentic audience (i.e. grant proposals, service learning projects, papers for the Conference of World Affairs, blogs and press releases); and
- Literature reviews.

### **What are students primarily writing in their senior year of high school?**

- Formulaic essays;
- Literary analyses;
- Some creative pieces (narrative, memoir); and
- Research papers.

### **What surprised us?**

- As the group searched for student writing that was neither a five paragraph essay nor a literacy analysis, they had a difficult time finding proficient papers in other genres. High school students do not appear to be required to write in a wide variety of genres to adequately prepare them for post-secondary writing.
- Writing now includes digital work.
- Professors understand that writing competency is a developmental process – that we can grow as writers.
- The essay form is under debate: “...we suggest taking a close look at whether or not ‘the essay’ as a genre is still a useful or viable genre upon which to base writing curricula at all levels. If the essay is no longer a viable genre, or even if it is, we need to do more to encourage instruction in genres that embrace both deep learning promoted when writing is an integral part of any course as well as exhibit the multimodal skills now required across the curriculum and into the workplace. One possibility among many is literary journalism that is rooted in artfully crafted narrative and critical research-based writing” (Addison and McGee). However, some of the university and community college professors argued that students

needed a basic understanding of the structure of the essay. Clearly, they saw the essay as a viable genre.

- There is debate about the thesis statement. Some professors value the thesis while others worry that the thesis can become a “pair of cement boots that can sink a writer’s own inquiry and discovery.”
- Some college professors provide students with rubrics and exemplars for writing assignments.
- College students are not alone in their writing studies; writing assistance is available at centers that offer one-on-one tutoring, professorial assistance during the drafting process, peer review groups, online editing assistance, and other help.
- The acceptance of the use of first person varies from discipline to discipline and sometimes from professor to professor. Some professors prefer first person while others don’t, though most seem to agree that opinion papers are best written in first person. Professors of the humanities tend to value first person perspectives while non-humanities professors favor third person perspective. Other comments about first person from the panel of university/community college writing instructors included:
  - “Some of the weaker papers will use many I’s.”
  - “The ‘I’ can be an easy and lazy way to write.”
  - “You can use ‘I’ as long as you don’t say, ‘In my opinion...’”
  - “I is fine; you is not. Period.”

Thus, students need to develop an awareness specifically of when first person is appropriate. More generally, it is the job of the writer to understand when and how to adhere to the conventions of writing for their audience.

## Myth Busting

**T**hroughout the meetings, participants frequently uncovered beliefs that they and their colleagues held to be true, but which the inquiry called into question. Following are some of those myths followed by the reality and implications for the curriculum.

**Myth:** •Writing should be taught only in English classes.

**Reality:** •All teachers should be responsible for teaching writing. •Writing is a shared responsibility among all teachers to ensure student success.

### Implications for Curriculum and Instruction

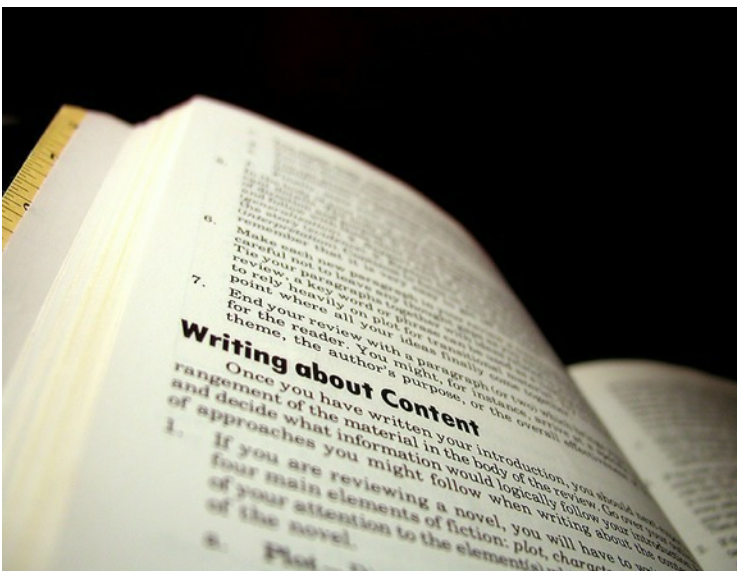
- Writing in the disciplines requires experts in the content area to assist students in applying what they know about the writing process to the content area expectations.
- Content area teachers need to model their own writing process in the various disciplines and provide exemplars to support student learning.
- Students need to understand the different expectations and demands of writing in the various content areas.
- Writing instruction by content area teachers creates accessibility and transferability to the discrete content areas.
- The standards for good writing are complex and vary by discipline.

**Myth:** •Students must leave high school able to write a 5 paragraph essay

**Reality:** •Students must leave high school having had rich reading and writing instruction and experiences across a range of genres and for multiple purposes and audiences.

### Implications for Curriculum and Instruction

- Curriculum must be aligned P-20 to ensure coherence and to prepare students for post-secondary academic and workforce opportunities.
- Writing in multiple genres must begin in the earliest grades as students experiment with purpose, audience, genre and topic.



- The essay is not inherently bad, but limiting students to the 5 paragraph essay does not allow for the broad range of structures that essays provide.
- Reflective writing is important for exploration of learning and critical thinking.
- Writing should reflect deep thinking skills including interpretation, justification, evaluation, analysis, and synthesis.
- Writing instruction should be inquiry-based and differentiated to support the diverse range of learners in any classroom.
- An emphasis on the broad range of non-fiction writing is supportive of all learners and aligns with the new Colorado Academic Standards and 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills.
- Student choice in writing is critical to developing a writer's voice and allows for greater application of learning.
- Use of mentor texts for content and craft support student writers in creating a vision for writing, refining for clarity and voice, and revising with a specified purpose and audience in mind.
- Rhetorical knowledge is key as writers make decisions about which strategies and devices they will use to influence their specified purpose and audience.
- Argumentation should be heavily emphasized.
- Writing across disciplines is essential for the success of all students. •This includes writing as a scientist, a historian, an artist, or as a mathematician.
- Students at all grades should have opportunities to engage in academic writing and writing with authentic audiences and purposes.

**Myth: •Writing is always product-oriented.**

**Reality:** Writing should be balanced between process and product.

#### Implications for Curriculum and Instruction:

- Students should be engaged in both “writing to learn” and “learning to write.”

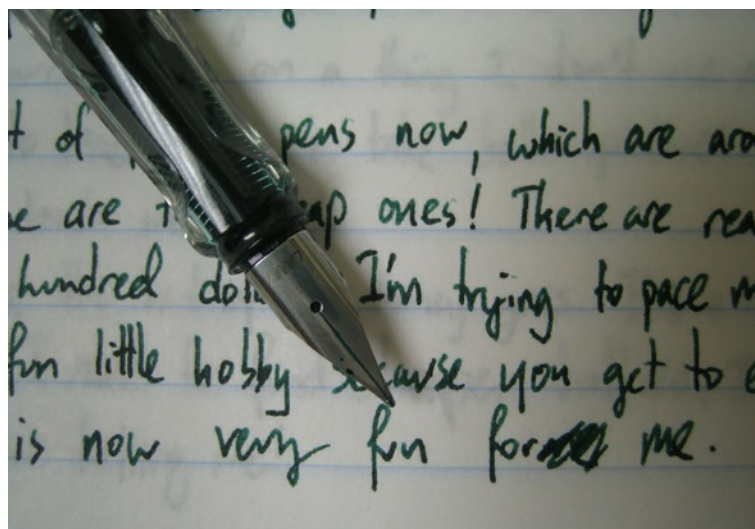
- Short writing (one page or less) is frequent in college, and so is longer writing.
- Authentic purposes and audiences provides real-life writing context.
- Inquiry-based writing allows students to experiment with their process.
- Students should be given choice to develop their own writing topics and ideas.
- Student self-assessment of writing promotes motivation and growth.
- Teachers need to develop themselves as writers alongside their students.
- Teachers should use writing demonstrations or “think alouds” to model thinking and authentic writing process.
- Students and teachers should engage in regular feedback and explicit conversations.
- Writing workshops develop students' writing processes.

**Myth: •Good writing is all about grammar and conventions.**

**Reality:** •Writing is about communication and the expression of ideas.

#### Implications for Curriculum and Instruction:

- Clarity is key, so students should be able to choose forms and structures that create the clearest vehicles for the expression of their ideas.
- Students should be given regular opportunities to use both formal and informal registers in writing and understand that their intended audience dictates which register they should use.



- Students should use writing as a daily activity to stimulate and clarify thinking.
- Authentic purposes and audiences for writing reinforce the need for grammar and conventions.
- Argumentation in writing requires thinking skills like analysis, synthesis and communication of ideas which are then supported by grammar and conventions.
- Through a wide range of reading, writers understand the ways that authors use grammar and conventions to bring clarity to their writing.
- Conventions are critical to communication and should be experimented with based on purpose and audience.
- Students should be familiar with evidential reasoning based on diverse sources and how to properly cite sources.

**Myth: Standardized tests, such as CSAP, provide evidence of student writing proficiency.**

**Reality:** In “Closing the Gap between High School Writing Instruction and College Writing Expectations,” Fanetti, Bushrow, and DeWeese assert that standardized tests adversely affect students’ growth in writing. They quote Brownwyn T. Williams: “Standardized testing, to be standardized, must create questions and answers that leave no room for interpretation. Such rigid questions and answers remove the importance of context from literacy practices and allow for no independent meaning making from students.”

#### **Implications for Curriculum and Instruction:**

Secondary teachers must recognize the duality between teachers’ accountability for standardized testing and the need to prepare students for post-secondary experiences in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

- Because of our current focus on standardized testing, secondary students learn to test well at the expense of being able to write well in college.
- Secondary educators are creating fixed, formulaic thinkers instead of life-long learners, which most schools’ mission statements seem to value.



## Recommendations

### **For English Departments**

The DASSC Writing Inquiry Group encourages English departments to engage in an inquiry similar to the one that prompted this document. Below is a suggested process for this study:

- Build an understanding of the problem by reading excerpts from the annual Legislative Report on Remedial Education;
- Study the research on the varying expectations for writing in high school and post-secondary. Here are suggested titles.
  - o Addison, Joanne and Sharon James McGee. “Writing in High School/Writing in College: Research Trends and Future Directions,” *College Composition and Communication*. 62:1 (2010): 147-179.
  - o Brockman, Elizabeth, David L. Taylor, MaryAnn K. Crawford, and Melinda Kreth. “Helping Students Cross the Threshold: Implications from a University Writing Assessment.” *English Journal* 99.3 (2010): 42–49.
  - o Fanetti, Susan, Kathy M. Bushrow, and David L. DeWeese. “Closing the Gap between High School Writing Instruction and College Writing Expectations. *English Journal* 99.4 (2010): 77–83.

- Examine syllabi from various post-secondary institutions.
- Read and discuss *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. Co-authored by the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Writing Project, and Council of Writing Program Administrators, this powerful document describes the skills, habits of mind, and experiences that are crucial for college success. The Framework is grounded in current research in writing and writing pedagogy and is an important document for guiding high school English departments' quest to prepare all students for post-secondary success.
- Provide short-term interventions for struggling writers based on formative assessments.
- Teach beyond the five paragraph essay. Read and study research on the five paragraph essay and develop a department policy about the role of formulaic writing.
- Based on the readings, spend professional learning community time reflecting on student writing and writing assignments by posing the question: How is this work preparing students for doing even more rigorous writing and thinking?

All texts mentioned above can be found at <http://writinginquiry.wikispaces.com/>

## For School Districts

Shifts needed in secondary writing curriculum:

Examine the writing requirements of professionals (i.e., resumes, job application letters, proposals, analysis, business plans, Power Points, company publications, summaries, protocol notes, editing/revising/critiquing).

Compare rhetorical variations that exist among disciplines and fields.

Make better known at the high school level the CCHE Approved Syllabi criteria for Freshman Composition, a support document for incoming college writers (see <http://writinginquiry.wikispaces.com/> for the CCHE Approved Syllabi criteria).

Ensure technology is accessible to students.

Develop community resources. Seek community partners for schools specific to writing needs and contact local newspapers/advertisers for publication opportunities.

Evaluate course options to ensure that they promote a balanced approach to writing across disciplines throughout the entire high school experience.

Recognize that writing proficiency develops over time.

Provide the necessary instructional support for teachers to reflect on their own process as writers, continually develop 21<sup>st</sup> Century literacies and understand real-world writing experiences. Professional learning could address the writing process, best practices in writing instruction, and writing across the curriculum.

Establish time for cross content planning to assess and establish a common definition of writing proficiency.

Ensure administrative and teacher leadership are well informed about writing instruction.



## Remaining Issues

Even though the inquiry focus was on preparing students to be successful in college, the DASSC Writing Inquiry group discovered that this quest was much more complex than originally expected. Additionally, the first year of this inquiry included only two districts in the Denver area, Douglas County and Aurora Public Schools, and three post-secondary institutions: University of Colorado Boulder, University of Colorado Denver, and Community College of Aurora. The issues are too complex to be addressed by such a small group in six meetings over a single school year. As this inquiry continues, more districts and post-secondary institutions need to be included.

Below are issues that still need further understanding if schools are, indeed, going to meet the mandate that all students are college and career ready by the time they graduate.

### Writing in the Disciplines

The importance of addressing disciplinary writing is urgent and requires further investigation:

- National Commission on Writing reports that two-thirds of salaried employees have some writing responsibility; inadequate writing skills are a barrier to promotion, certain types of writing are commonly required, and an estimated \$3 billion is spent each year training employees to write.
- Post-secondary education requires business writing that is authentic and accountable to the clients' expectations.

However, few high school teachers have training in disciplinary writing. To adequately prepare students for the world beyond high school, teachers need to understand the rhetorical demands of the disciplines. For instance, what are the conventions for writing in the world of business? How do those demands differ from writing in the sciences? What should writers know and be able to do as they produce technical texts?

### 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy

Proficiency in 21<sup>st</sup> Century literacy skills is equally important for entering college or the workplace. In order for students to be prepared for post-secondary opportunities, NCTE argues that students should have the following skills:

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology;
- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally;
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;

- Manage, analyze and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media texts; and Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

Despite NCTE's guidelines, teachers need more detail. What is the foundational knowledge students need for 21<sup>st</sup> Century literacy? What do students need for today and for their futures?

### Student Writing Exemplars

One of the group's goals was to find samples of student writing that illustrated what competent writing looks like mid-year. Samples of the work of seniors can be found at <http://writinginquiry.wikispaces.com/>. The work hints at the range of work that students need to be producing.

Finding these samples was wrought with challenges: teachers were hesitant to share student work, the samples too often were formulaic, and the range of writing was limited. As a result, the writing on the wiki is just a start of the collection of exemplars that teachers and students need. This is work that needs to continue.

### *Who were the participants in the inquiry?*

The DASSC Writing Inquiry Group brought together instructional experts from Aurora and Douglas County Public Schools and instructors and professors from University of Colorado Boulder, University of Colorado Denver, and Aurora Community College. Specifically, the inquiry group, facilitated by Dr. Stevi Quate, included:

- 2 directors of academic programs from Aurora and Douglas County Public Schools
- 2 coordinators from Aurora and Douglas County Public Schools
- 1 high school English department chair
- 11 classroom teachers at the high school level
- 1 literacy specialist
- 5 literacy or instructional coaches
- 1 chair of a community college program
- 3 instructors of writing at the post-secondary level
- 2 representatives from the education department at the University of Colorado at Denver (1 assistant professor who teaches and researches literacy and 1 senior instructor who teaches English methods)

## Resources

### Journal articles:

Addison, Joanne and Sharon James McGee. "Writing in High School/Writing in College: Research Trends and Future Directions," *College Composition and Communication*. 62:1 (2010): 147-179.

Brockman, Elizabeth, David L. Taylor, MaryAnn K. Crawford, and Melinda Kreth. "Helping Students Cross the Threshold: Implications from a University Writing Assessment." *English Journal* 99.3 (2010): 42-49.

Fanetti, Susan, Kathy M. Bushrow, and David L. DeWeese. "Closing the Gap between High School Writing Instruction and College Writing Expectations." *English Journal* 99.4 (2010): 77-83.

Sommers, Nancy and Laura Saltz. "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year." *College Composition and Communication*. 56:1 (2004): 124-149.

### Books and Pamphlets:

Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing. National Council of Teachers of English: Urbana, Illinois, 2011.

National Writing Project and Carl Nagin. *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*. Jossey Bass: San Francisco, CA, 2003.

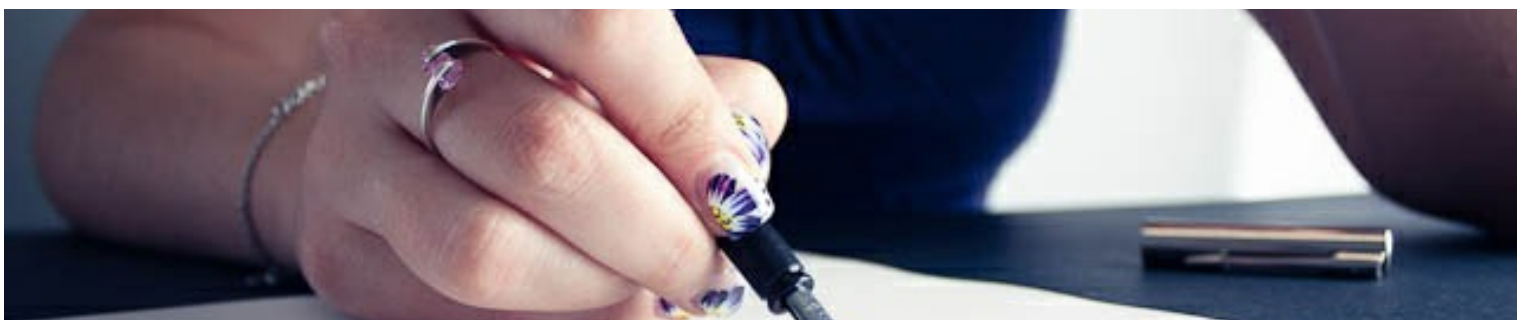
Sullivan, Patrick, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau, eds. *What is "College-Level" Writing? Volume 2*. National Council of Teachers of English: Urbana, Illinois, 2010.

Thompson, Thomas C., ed. *Teaching Writing in High School and College: Conversations and Collaborations*. National Council of Teachers of English: Urbana, IL. 2002.

Tinberg, Howard and Patrick Sullivan, eds. *What is "College-Level" Writing?* National Council of Teachers of English: Urbana, Illinois, 2006.

### Special thanks to the following educators for their dedication to this project:

Richard Argys	Mary Madera	David Roberts-Brysh
Charlotte Butler	Julie McEldowney	Melisa Roth
Jessica Cuthbertson	Mike McEwan	Nancy Shanklin
Linda Damon	Ashley Moorshead	Holly Voorhess-Carmical
Mhari Doyle	Corrie Napier	
Julie Fletcher	Dana Nardello	
Angelique Ford	Susan Olezone	
Leslie Fox	Lonni Pearce	
Colleen Grant	Cari Roberts	
Sally Green	Cher Pitaniello	
Wendy Lerolland	Stevi Quate	
Anna MacBriar	Sherry Reiersen	



June 1, 2011

Dear DASSC Superintendents:

We would like to thank DASSC for encouraging the work of the Writing Inquiry Group. Because of your support, this collaboration between Douglas and Aurora Public Schools brought together teachers, literacy coaches and specialists, and district coordinators who partnered with higher education faculty to understand the decline in writing achievement and why so many incoming college students need remediation in writing.

Over the course of the year, we studied the research, heard from higher education, and listened to first year college students. We approached this concern about remediation from an inquiry perspective. What we have learned has implications for improving the writing and thinking of students and contributing to their future success. This document presents our key findings from the inquiry.

Towards the end of our year-long inquiry, the National Council of Teachers of English published a seminal document, *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, that verified what we had found through our inquiry. Whereas we approached the issue of remediation from a district view, this document examined it from the balcony view. What we had learned through our inquiry reflected the state of the nation. Since this NCTE document represents the best thinking of nationally recognized researchers in the area of writing, we believe their recommendations and insights can serve our state well.

We hope that districts will use these two documents as companions: Lessons Learned to summarize our findings and *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* for research-based suggestions for writing improvement. Like district leaders, we feel a sense of urgency and know that we need to act quickly to improve the state of writing.

This first year of inquiry has expanded our awareness of the complexities of the issue and the multiple stakeholders who should be involved, raising even more questions and prompting us to plan for next steps. Our focus for upcoming year will be to include Cherry Creek School District and to expand the involvement of our colleges and universities. Content area teachers will join us in the discussion of disciplinary writing and writing in the workplace.

Again, thank you for your support.

Charlotte A. Butler  
Instructional Coordinator, P-20 Literacy  
Aurora Public Schools

Holly D. Voorhees-Carmical  
Curriculum Coordinator, P-20 Literacy  
Douglas County School District

Stevi Quate  
Facilitator  
Colorado Critical Friends